

Victim Or Villain?

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[0:00] Well, I'd like us to turn back together to Genesis 27. Let me read these verses that are on the screen, 30 to 33. As soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, when Jacob had scarcely gone out from the presence of Isaac, his father, Esau, his brother, came in from his hunting.

He also prepared delicious food and brought it to his father. And he said to his father, Let my father arise and eat of his son's game, that you may bless me. His father Isaac said to him, Who are you? He answered, I'm your son, your firstborn, Esau. Then Isaac trembled very violently and said, Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me? And I ate it all before you came, and I've blessed him. Yes, and he shall be blessed.

We've been working through a series over the last few weeks called Taking Sin Seriously. And we're reaching the conclusion of that tonight. And it's been an opportunity for us just to think about this theme, this issue that is so real to our experience in life and so important in Scripture, the whole issue of sin.

And yet, despite its importance, it's a topic that people don't really want to think about and that people can often find off-putting in regard to Christianity. Yet, what I hope we've seen is that it's so incredibly important to take sin seriously.

[1:19] Because when we do, we see how important the gospel is, and we see how beautiful the gospel is. And every week that we've been looking at this, we've highlighted the fact that if you take something seriously, you're recognizing that it's important.

And the things that are most serious are the things that are of life and death importance. So teaching a child how to cross the road is a matter of life and death importance, so you take it seriously.

Making sure someone takes the appropriate dose of their medication is very often a matter of life and death importance, so we take it seriously. Knowing how to swim before you jump into a deep pool is a matter of life and death, so we take it seriously.

Sin is a matter of eternal life or eternal death, so we've got to take it seriously. We've looked at the definition of sin, the vocabulary of sin, the imagery of sin, the noetic effect of sin, the effect that sin has had on our minds.

Tonight, we're concluding our series, and we're thinking a little bit more about our relationship with sin, and our title is Humanity and Sin, Victim or Villain?

[2:47] Some of you will have seen that yesterday, Stephen Libby from Traitors was at the Sports Centre. Lots of people went to visit him. Lots of people have been watching Traitors over the winter, and of course Stephen won.

I've got a question for you. On that show, was Stephen good or bad? Was he good or bad? Because the whole time, he had to be deceitful.

He had to pretend that he was a faithful, even though all the time he was actually a traitor. And you think, well, okay, that's bad. And in a sense it was, but of course, that was the whole point of the game.

And so he was just doing exactly what that game show is asking him to do. So was he bad?

Was he good? It's a very interesting question. He certainly did a good job of what he had to do. And I know people who met him yesterday, and they said what a lovely guy he was.

[3:49] So I'm not saying that he's bad, but I just mean in the terms of the show, you know what I mean. That's an interesting question. It's raising the whole victim-villain question. I'm going to ask you some more questions.

First of all, I'm going to read Genesis 3, 1 to 6. Now, the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, did God actually say, you shall eat of any tree in the garden?

And the woman said to the serpent, we may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden. But God said, you shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that's in the midst of the garden. Neither shall you touch it, lest you die. But the serpent said to the woman, you will not surely die.

For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you'll be like God, knowing good and evil. So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate.

And she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. My question is this, when you look at Eve in this narrative, do you think that she's a victim or a villain?

[4:53] What's your instinctive answer to that? Eve in that narrative, victim or villain? What about other people in the Bible?

Samson, was he a victim or a villain? Saul in the Old Testament, was he a victim or a villain? David, was he a victim or a villain? Saul in the New Testament, who also was known as Paul, was he a victim or a villain?

What about people that you encounter in day-to-day lives? So the child who behaves really badly in school, victim or villain? The person who struggles with addiction, victim or villain?

Illegal immigrant, victim or villain? And maybe most importantly of all, when you look at yourself, what do you see?

Victim or villain? Now, the big point that I want to give you tonight is that the answer to the victim-villain question is always both.

[5:58] And that's crucial to recognize if we're going to take sin seriously and if we're going to understand the gospel accurately. And one place where we see this very clearly is in the life of Jacob.

That's who we read about from Genesis 27. And his life is a fascinating case study of this victim-villain tension. We read chapter 27, where Jacob pretends to be his brother in order to deceive his father and receive the blessing that belonged to the firstborn, which of course was his twin Esau, who was actually older than him.

Esau is devastated when he finds out. And he lays the blame squarely at his brother. And he says that he has deceived me. Your brother came.

And, well, his father explains, your brother came. And Esau said, he's cheated me these two times. But was it Jacob? Or was it his mother?

Because we read earlier in the chapter how it was actually Rebekah's scheme. And she was the one telling Jacob what to do. And she said, you must obey my voice.

[7:15] Was he a victim? Was he a villain? And throughout Jacob's life, you see the same tension. So he flees from Esau, ends up with his uncle Laban. There he falls in love with Laban's daughter, Rachel.

And he wants to marry her. And Laban says, okay, if you work for me for seven years, you can marry Rachel. Jacob says, no problem. He works for seven years. The wedding comes. The bride, the veiled bride is presented.

And after the marriage has taken place, he discovers that it was Leah, Rachel's sister.

And so Jacob, this time, is the one who gets deceived. What have you done to me? Why did you deceive me? As time goes on, tensions increase between Jacob and Laban's sons.

Jacob has become a very successful rearer of herds and animals. And tensions arise. Eventually, Jacob decides to flee. He sets his sons and his wives on camels.

[8:18] And he flees. And in doing so, it tells us that he tricked Laban by not telling him that he intended to flee. So this time, he's the one who deceives.

Jacob's the one who deceives Laban. Jacob settles in Canaan. But his beloved wife, Rachel, dies, giving birth to Jacob's youngest son, Benjamin.

Jacob has 12 sons. We read later in verse 37 that of those 12 sons, one of them was Jacob's favorite. That was Joseph.

Now, the Israel heir is another name for Jacob, a new name that God gave to him. Here, the emphasis is that Joseph is his favorite son. But that favoritism from Jacob provoked huge tensions in the family, culminating in the brothers, selling Joseph to be a slave and deceiving their father with the story that Joseph has been killed by wild animals.

And Jacob is left utterly distraught as a result of this. However, Joseph was not dead. Instead, he'd been taken to Egypt, where he eventually reaches the top of the government. And eventually, he's reunited with his brothers and finally reunited with his father.

[9:37] Joseph, my son, is still alive. I'll go and see him before he dies. So that's a whirlwind tour of Jacob's life. You can read it in more detail from Genesis 25, 26, 27, all the way through to the end of Genesis.

And you see that he cheats others, he gets cheated himself. He gains flocks and herds, he loses his wife. He gets threatened by opponents, he himself is seen as a threat.

He shows foolish favoritism. He suffers what he thought was the loss of his treasured child. Is he a victim? Is he a villain? He's both.

And the same is true of Abraham. The same is true of Moses. The same is true of David, of Peter, of Paul, and of me.

This balance of victim-villain is very important to understand theologically, and it's very important to understand pastorally. And I want to just unpack those two things in the time remaining.

[10:37] I want to understand, theologically, it's very important for us to remember this victim-villain balance. And I want to highlight three important theological statements that arise from this.

Number one, sin does not find its origin in humanity, but it's found a home in humanity. Sin does not find its origin in humanity, but it's found a home in humanity.

Now, that's a key aspect of the Bible's teaching in regard to sin, and actually marks a crucial contrast between the biblical worldview and a secular worldview. In Genesis 3, as we read, everything is instigated not by Eve, but by the serpent.

Eve gets deceived. Now, that does not make Eve innocent. And you can see that in the narrative, it's so important to look at who's active. And initially, it's the serpent that's active and deceives Eve. But then it goes on to speak about the woman's actions. She saw that it was wise. She took, she gave to her husband. So, she's not innocent in the process, and she takes decisive steps to make the situation worse.

[11:52] But, first and foremost, it was the serpent that started it. So, yes, Eve's guilty in what she did. Adam, by the way, is also guilty in everything that he didn't do, because he should have protected his wife, and he should absolutely have not let any of this happen.

But neither of them started it. Sin does not originate in humanity, unless you have a secular worldview. Because according to the secular worldview, you've got two options.

One, sin is not really a thing, because ultimately, there is no ultimate categories of right and wrong, overarching reality.

Very few people believe that. But the other option is that if sin is a thing, it's actually our fault. It's entirely our fault.

Now, the amazing thing about the biblical worldview is that it neither diminishes sin to that level of saying, well, it's not really a thing, nor does it degrade humanity to say, actually, everything that's wrong and evil in the world comes from us.

[13:04] Because from the biblical worldview, sin is ultimately supernatural in its origin. It's satanic in its origin. But sin, although it doesn't have its origin in humanity, it's definitely found a home in humanity.

And so sin has spread to all humanity, and on our own, we can't escape the shadow of death that hangs over us all, and we can't escape the effect that sin has had on our relationships, on our health, on all that we seek to do.

And that takes us to our second point. So this is big theological point number two. Sin has had a devastating effect in terms of what it leaves us susceptible to, and it's had a devastating effect in terms of what it's made us capable of.

Sin's had a devastating effect in terms of what it leaves us susceptible to, and it's had a devastating effect in terms of what it makes us capable of. And that's the tragic reality that we now face.

So sin's left humanity guilty before God, and we have become a source of so many problems for ourselves and for one another. Yet at the same time, sin hurts us, and it causes so much pain and suffering for people.

[14:17] And all of this means that we are the recipients of cruelty, and we are the agents of harm. We're the recipients of cruelty. We're the agents of harm.

So we get deceived by people, and yet we ourselves will lie at times. We get exploited by people, and yet we can easily find ourselves greedy and selfish.

We get spoken about, yet it's so tempting to gossip. We get judged, but we can be so quick to criticize others ourselves. People hold grudges against us, but we can also refuse to forgive.

We might get left in the lurch by colleagues, but sometimes we might also be a bit lazy. I have found myself at times in my life saying, I can't believe they did that. And I have found myself at times in life saying, I can't believe I did that.

Sins made us recipients of cruelty and agents of harm. And one of the big dangers that we can face in this victim-villain balance is that we can use the victim aspect to justify the villain aspect.

[15:30] And isn't that so often the case where we get hurt, we get rejected, we get mistreated and wounded, and then we use that as a justification to behave badly towards other people.

Duncan actually said this this morning. I had written this in my notes a few days ago, but he said the very same phrase that I'm about to say, the fact that hurt people hurt people.

And the first one's an adjective, the second one's a verb. People who have been hurt will so often go on and hurt others.

I've used this illustration before in another sermon a few years ago. Some of you won't have heard it, and maybe we've all forgotten it. But humanity is like a vase. A vase is made so beautiful and so precious, but it's fragile.

And if a vase gets broken, what happens to it? It becomes incredibly sharp and very dangerous.

That's so often what it can be like for us. Sin's had a devastating effect of what it leaves us susceptible to and a devastating effect in what it makes us capable of.

[16:42] And that takes us to our third big theological point. Sin has left us both wrong and wronged. Therefore, we need forgiveness and we need healing.

Sin has left us both wrong and wronged, so we need forgiveness and healing. So sin's left us villains. We're wrong, we're guilty, we're accountable.

Now, there's definitely different degrees in which that has affected different people, but when we compare ourselves to other people, there is a whole hierarchy of levels of mess and sin and difficulty in our lives.

But if we compare ourselves before God, there's a great equalizing effect because none of us, none of us are at His standard. None of us, none of us are righteous before Him.

We were not made to be like that. We were not made to be sinners. But that's what we've become. And we've done things that God has forbidden and we've failed to do things that God has commanded.

[17:47] So sin has left us villains, but it's also left us as victims. And so we're frequently wronged by others and by the circumstances that we're in. People have done stuff to you that they should not have done.

People have said things to you that they should have never said. And we get bruised and betrayed. We get overlooked. We get undervalued. Sin has brought a huge amount of suffering into our experience.

And so the sinner who is wrong needs to find forgiveness. And the sinner who is wronged needs to find healing.

And the key point is that the gospel gives us both. Jesus has come so that we can be forgiven. And He's come so that we can be healed.

In fact, the gospel is grounded on this fact that we are victim and villain. And both are addressed magnificently in the person and work of Jesus.

[18:56] And this is so important to remember because it's very easy to have an understanding of the gospel that's... You can go in both directions. You can either have an understanding of the gospel that's all victim-focused, or you can have an understanding of the gospel that's all villain-focused.

And it's a mistake to go to just one side or the other. If we're all victim in our mindset, then the gospel becomes entirely therapeutic. So we see everything through the lens of our own suffering, our struggles, our frustrations, and the fact that we've been wounded by other people or by the circumstances that we find ourselves in life.

And so we look to Jesus to heal us and restore us. And that's good. That part of it's good. But there's a danger that our expectations, if we're all victim, then our expectations of Jesus can be arising from a posture of feeling sorry for ourselves.

And that can lead us to the mindset that we think that God owes us a better life. And of course, if that better life doesn't turn out the way we expect it to or want it to, then we resent God and he becomes part of the problem.

We think that God owes us a better life and if it doesn't work out maybe the way we want it to, then we can see God as a problem. And I've seen that happen to many, many people.

[20:24] That's what happens if we're just all victim in our mindset. If we're all villain in our mindset, then the gospel becomes entirely judicial. So we see everything through the lens of our guilt and our failing.

And that can leave us constantly carrying a burden of guilt and a sense of frustration and a feeling of failure in our lives. We feel like we're always on the brink of doing something that will make God hate us or that will make other people turn on us and look at us and see us for what we really are. We feel like we can never let go of our mistakes. We can never move on from our failures. We can never, never get past our regrets. So yes, we might think, well, yeah, I am forgiven, but we're still actually crippled by a sense of sin and shame.

And we feel that we owe God a much better standard. That we, you know, we've got to improve. We've got to be better.

We've got to try and get to the level that he expects of us. Now, both of these extremes that I've described are examples of where being half right leads you to being completely wrong.

[21:36] because both of these are half right. Because the gospel is therapeutic and the gospel is judicial. But it's never only one of these.

It's always both. So Jesus has come so that we can be forgiven. The sinful villain can be acquitted. And Jesus has come so that we can be healed.

The suffering victim can be restored. And we desperately need both. And the world around us needs both. And the key point is that we have to be very careful about introducing this idea of owing into the gospel.

And I said a second ago that, you know, the therapeutic error thinks that God owes us a better life. And the judicial error thinks that we still owe God a better standard.

But the whole point of the gospel is that it's not about what's owed. The gospel is about what's been paid.

[22:45] Jesus has paid it all. He has paid the penalty for our sin.

And he is freely and graciously giving out the healing and forgiveness that we desperately need. So if you're sitting here and you feel riddled with guilt, Jesus is saying, come to me and find forgiveness.

Total, full forgiveness. And if you're sitting here feeling wounded and bruised, Jesus is saying, come to me and find healing.

And all of this is captured beautifully in the words that we read at the very start. He himself bore our sins on the tree that we might die to sin and live to righteousness by his wounds.

You have been healed. And so the villain is acquitted because Jesus died in her place and the victim is healed by his amazing restoring love.

[23:57] So it's super, super important to remember this theologically. It's also incredibly important to remember this pastorally. I've got about two minutes to say all this. Basically, what I want to say is this.

When you look at anybody in any situation, what are you looking at? You're looking at a victim and a villain. In the sense that, yes, we actually do make mistakes and we are responsible for our actions and we've, you know, we've actually, we've made choices that we shouldn't have made and we've reacted in ways that we shouldn't have made.

But also, we've done that because we're bruised and battered and suffering and weak and our judgment's impaired and sometimes things are so tough for us and it's so important to remember that pastorally because what do we tend to do when something goes wrong in someone's life? We put them into one of two boxes, the victim box or the villain box. Or if something goes wrong in our lives, we do it to ourselves. We put ourselves into the victim box or the villain box.

So you look at somebody and something's gone wrong in their life and you might think they are entirely villain and so you look at them with a sort of inward sense of disgust.

[25:12] Or you might look at them as entirely victim and that is a much better posture in many ways. But sometimes that can overlook us from actually saying, well, no, but you need to, you know, you need to actually take action, you need to help.

I mean, a great example of this just now is with children. You know, sometimes there are children in settings and there's, we just always want to see them as victim and some children are victims of awful circumstances and I'm not really talking about that.

I mean more just the fact that we basically want to never, ever, ever, ever, ever think that our children have done something wrong. But actually, sometimes you need to say to your children, you shouldn't have done that. Sometimes that's, and we need to teach ourselves in the same way.

The gospel treats us in that way. That's the way Jesus treats us because Jesus knows that this victim-villain balance is there. And so there's a couple of great examples.

I'm running out of time so I don't want to, I can't rush through but here's a good example. A woman came to him with a disabling spirit for 18 years and he heals her. He says, you're freed from your disability.

[26:20] The ruler of the synagogue, verse 14, indignant because Jesus has done this on the Sabbath and Jesus says, see at the end there, ought not this woman whom Satan has bound for 18 years be loosed from this bond.

Jesus recognizes and sees that she's a victim in her suffering and that moves him to compassion and to help her. You see a similar thing with, you know, sometimes you've got this account in Luke 13.

People are asking Jesus about the Galileans who'd been slaughtered. Their blood had been mingled with sacrifices and Jesus thinks, well, do you just think that's just because they're villains? Do you think they were worse sinners?

You say, no. Unless you repent, you'll also perish. And the people from whom a tower fell on don't think that that's just like kind of a karma kind of idea that just means, oh, they're bad so something bad happened to them.

And no, that's not what it's like, Jesus said. But he said, you've got to make sure that you repent as well. And so you see the victim-villain balance very powerfully in that passage.

[27:20] So it's so important for us to remember this. Jesus saw it. Sin has left humanity as victim and villain. We need to remember it when looking at other people.

So when you see a drug addict, we mustn't look at them just as a law-breaking threat. When we see an alcoholic, we must not look at them just as an irresponsible mess. If you have a difficult colleague or customer this week, you mustn't just look at them as a pain in the neck.

And if someone has stopped coming to church, we mustn't just assume that they're a backslider or something like that. Because in all these situations, there is so much that we don't know.

And if we have the victim-only category or the villain-only category, we're forgetting that the truth is never that simple. And instead, our posture always needs to be one of grace.

